

Wycombe W. O, Skelmersdale Utd. 3

THERE is to be no fairy-tale reprieve for the fallen idols of Wycombe after Saturday's demoralising F.A. Amateur Cup exit at Loakes Park.

News that Wanderers had questioned the eligibility of Skelmersdale goalkeeper, Peter Frankish, to play in Saturday's quarter final, raised fresh hope among thousands of local soccer fans.

But, after meeting last night (Monday) in London, the F.A.'s Cup Committee decided in favour of the Northerners, who therefore go ahead with their semi-final against Leatherhead at Boleyn on Saturday as planned.

So, Cup favourites Wycombe are out, and with them go prospects of an all-Bucks final, plus the last possibility of keeping the trophy inside Isthmian league circles for another season (historically, 1970 winners Baffled went out at Loakes Park in the second round).

Instead, Skelmersdale, 1967 season finalists and now assured of a place in the last for a third successive year, are left down to carry the Northern challenge against three Albinian league Premier Division teams Slough, Dagenham, and, of course, Leatherhead.

The Mersesiders drafted Frankish into their line-up late last week. He replaced injured international star, Terry Croft, who had broken his arm in two places only seconds before the final whistle when Skens beat Tow Law 1-0 in a third round replay.

Reserve team 'keeper, Colin Donnelly, initially took over from Croft, but after skilful over performances, including he 4-1 Cheshire League Cup defeat last Wednesday evening, he made way for the more experienced Frankish.

Saturday's tie represented the amateur Cup debut of Frankish, a Grimsby Town reserve. But, as the Cup Committee announced in a statement last night, Frankish first turned up for the Skens on February 3 in a Liverpool Centre Commission fixture, and therefore qualified.

Had the decision gone against the Lancashire outfit, they could have been ordered to travel back south for a re-match of their quarter-final this week.

Before last night's decision, Skelmersdale officials hit out at Wycombe for what chairman Bill Gregson called "sour grapes". He and his fellow committee men confidently refuted the idea that Frankish should not have been played.

The F.A. received Wanderers' letter only a few minutes before their meeting was due to open. Wanderers' chairman, Jack Smedhurst, explained his club's position on Monday morning: "Now the matter (re Frankish) has been raised, we shall ask the F.A. whether or not it is true."

Mr. Smedhurst, emphasising that it was an inquiry rather than a protest, denied the allegation of "sour grapes". "This is not our policy," he said, after hearing the decision on Frankish.

"We had to make the inquiry to the F.A. because of the number of rumours that were flying about."

Indeed, the 'Free Press' offices were inundated with telephone inquiries over the situation on Monday. Confusion springing from the Frankish affair tends to overshadow the 90 minutes over which all the fuss has been.

From a distance, Skens' win seems conclusive enough. But, when put under a microscope, the full truth comes more readily into focus.

Man-for-man, skill-for-skill,

By Mike Whitesman

Wycombe are the side Leatherhead should now be plotting against.

Unfortunately, it's a first-time business this Cup soccer so there's no safe way of learning by mistakes.

Whether Wycombe threw it away on Saturday, or Skelmersdale took it from them, is a question for unending debate. Perhaps it was a mixture of both.

But, as late as five minutes into the second half, no amount of persuasion could have convinced a crowd of 10,000 plus—the largest at Loakes Park for many seasons—that the Northerners could last out much longer.

Who could have foreseen just what a devastating effect Skens' shock first goal would have on the Isthmians? Wanderers' deterioration was both rapid, and drastic. From rampant Cup favourite they fell apart at the seams and finished a well beaten side.

Skelmersdale, for so long dependent on their unyielding defence and goalkeeper Frankish, suddenly emerged from underground to complete a lightning coup which would have done any emergent African state proud.

Ultimately it was as clear-cut a win as St. Albans' victory at Loakes Park in the same stage

of the competition last season. And it left the Blues looking just as ragged.

Central figure in Skens' take-over bid was centre-forward Ted Dickin, last season a defender but now the club's leading scorer. With speedy international Paul Clements presenting endless problems to the casualty-hindered Wycombe backline, Dickin flashed home the two goals which, at that moment in time, put a totally unrealistic picture on play.

Wycombe's inability to recover made it that much easier for their opponents from then on, and a third goal came in the last minute through Alan Wolfe.

By now no one could question Skelmersdale's qualifications for a semi-final appearance against Leatherhead.

Wycombe have their excuses. In defence, Paul Friedchillo played after having a pain-killing injection on a groin injury, John Delaney had been suffering since Wednesday with tonsillitis and still looked slightly grumpy, and Keith Blunt withdrew at the last minute with a broken toe, leaving Charlie Gale to wear the number three shirt.

Forward power was also out back when John Hutchinson suffered an early facial injury and played out much of the afternoon with a badly swollen right eye.

It is no wonder therefore that Hutchinson made small headway against such a competent full-back as Skens' Stan Allan.

But that still doesn't explain why the Wanderers forward line as a whole, active and dazzling as it was for almost an hour, hadn't put their side ahead before the interval.

Few clear chances were missed, but then the urgency of Skens' defenders—Skipper John Turner in particular—rarely allowed one to show through.

Turner, in fact, spoilt perhaps the most promising opening afforded Wanderers all the match, quickly intervening before Tony Horseman could manage a shot when well placed near goal in the 34th minute.

Ridiculous as it seems on reflection, Skens' last tilt at Wembley looked doomed from the very start. Next season they are joining the Northern Premier League and turning professional in the process, so a win at Loakes Park meant a lot to them.

If anyone doubted the fact, then the Northerners' desperate but well-drilled resistance as Wanderers set a red hot pace in the first half, soon confirmed it.

Keith Searle and Horseman both found Frankish to be an unco-operative customer—as stubborn in fact as his colleagues around him.

By failing to break down this barrier, Wanderers were forever promising the earth and delivering nothing.

And such a situation couldn't prevail for ever. The rot set in with Dickin's first goal. But the foundations had been laid long before, camouflaged by the quick-fire methods employed by Wycombe's attack, around which so much of the first half revolved.

For, while home fans responded boisterously to the favourable state of affairs on-field, so Skelmersdale's link-men kept a vital stronghold around mid-field.

So little was seen of the visiting Ironrunners in the opening period that this advantage remained effectively disguised until the later stages, by which time there was nothing Wanderers could do about it—despite a warrior-like performance from Ted Powell.

The turning point came in the 52nd minute when, against the run of all previous play, Skens won a corner. Wolfe lifted his kick over the Wycombe area, and, with the home defence dithering, Dickin headed it into goal.

Wanderers' immediate reaction was to keep pushing. But the conviction went out of their football with alarming speed, and a second goal 20 minutes later rubbed away any remaining polish they still had.

Dickin exposed their defence, outturning them before shooting through Maskell's hands to end the kind of breakaway a

falling Wycombe were no longer capable of restraining.

Dimmed memories alone remained of Wanderers' early dominance as Vince Faulkner took over from Hutchinson for the last 16 minutes.

By this time, Skens' large following on the terraces quite confidently chanted "Bolton, Bolton, here we come", and disappointed Wycombe supporters had begun to drift out of the ground.

Wanderers kept pushing, but each attack stood less chance than the one before.

Skens' third goal was no surprise, Peter Hardcastle slipped the ball across from the left and Wolfe transferred it goalwards, with only seconds remaining.

Looked at from any angle, Saturday gave the Leatherhead players and officials watching the game plenty to think about.

Wycombe too can reflect and ponder on 90 minutes in which they went from one extreme to the other.

For, once again, when it counted they were found lacking in big-match temperament and character—the two qualities indeed that ultimately made it Skelmersdale's day.

WYCOMBE WANDERERS: J. Maskell, P. Hutchison, C. Gale, J. Powell, J. Delaney, C. Rundle, E. Bremer, J. Hutchinson, sub V. Faulkner.
SKELMERSDALE UNITED: E. Fritchard, A. Horseman, P. Frankish, S. Allen, R. Poole, J. Turner, W. Bennett, A. McDermott, A. Swift (sub), A. Windsor, R. King, A. Wolfe, E. Dickin, P. Hardcastle, P. Clements.
Referee: T. W. Davies (Norwich).
Official Attendance: 10,203.
Half-time: 0-0.
Goalscorers: Skelmersdale-Dickin 2 (52, 72), Wolfe (90).